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GUEST: **Djibril Diallo**
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DAY OF THE AFRICAN CHILD

DJIBRIL DIALLO, Special Assistant to the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), discusses UNICEF's efforts in supporting African women and children in conjunction with the Day of the African Child. African governments have shown strong support for the World Summit for Children Declaration and Plan of Action by incorporating provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into their national statutes. Through national social mobilization with UNICEF's assistance, two-thirds of the African countries have achieved their immunization targets against the six major communicable childhood diseases. But Mr. Diallo is baffled by the slowness of the international response to Africa's needs. He believes that democracy would help to alleviate the plight of the continent's women and children.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

Over the last few decades, many African countries have endeavoured to improve the lives of their populations. But hindered by a wide range of social, economic and political obstacles as well as natural and manmade disasters, African women and children in particular have suffered from poverty, disease, inadequate education and the lack of health and other services. What can the international community do to bring attention to the plight of the children of Africa?

Our guest today has a special interest in and commitment to the cause of African children. He's Djibril Diallo, Special Assistant to the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, or UNICEF. Joining me to speak with Mr. Diallo are Judith Aita of USIA Press Service and Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria. Mr. Diallo, welcome to World Chronicle.

Mr. Diallo, the world has been horrified by the reports of the terrible things that have been happening in Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, various other places in Africa, but these in particular, and it seems that the principal victims probably are the children. What can the international community do to protect these kids?

DIALLO: Well, children need peace. There is a need for a redoubling of the concerted efforts of the international community to bring an end to these sufferings. In the meantime, through the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF and its partners are developing what we call corridors of tranquillity, which enable us to go in and have access to the suffering women and children as quickly as possible wherever there are situations of conflict. But it is a situation which is very, very worrying, and the only way to deal with it is to bring a satisfactory solution to the conflict.

LITTLEJOHNS: You talk about corridors of tranquillity. Who designates these corridors, and what happens once they've been designated?

DIALLO: The concept of corridors of tranquillity is a simple one in the sense that all warring parties need to agree that the suffering people need to be given assistance as quickly as possible. So that there is a negotiating phase that goes on without necessarily recognizing the different parties, but just making sure that the humanitarian dimension of this exercise is recognized.

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LITTLEJOHNS: But this doesn't work all the time. I mean, Rwanda, for example, there are cases of injured people being bayoneted by the troops, so what about the poor kids?

DIALLO: Yes, unfortunately what happened recently in Rwanda is a clear case of a total breakdown of a system, and therefore it has not been possible to have any kind of coordinated response of the type that I was mentioning. But even in those circumstances, I believe that it was possible for the NGOs for --

LITTLEJOHNS: Non-governmental organizations.

DIALLO: -- non-governmental organizations, thank you -- and for the international community to come in and try to do what can be done. But it's a very, very tragic situation. That's a special case, Rwanda and Burundi.

AITA: UNICEF works so hard in Africa, immunization programmes and other services for children. When something like this happens in Rwanda and in other countries, do you get discouraged?

DIALLO: I feel that, first of all as an African, I feel that it's something like a temporary setback. As a UN official at the same time, I feel that it is something which needs to be looked at with a wider picture. Because if we take 1994 as an example, there have been a lot of developments in Africa which have been cause for celebration. So those developments should not be washed away suddenly because of Rwanda and Burundi, because, let's remember that before the killing of the previous president of Burundi, President Ndadaye, Burundi and South Africa would have been the only two countries in Africa of recent history where you would have had a minority which would have worked itself almost out of power -- the apartheid regime in South Africa and the minority Tutsi population in Burundi. So that's a positive story as well. So that whenever we are talking about these situations, we have to look at the continent as a whole and see that there are many islands of hope on which the recovery of Africa can be built.

AITA: What are some of the other positive aspects of the situation in Africa, and African children especially?

DIALLO: First of all, who would have believed that 1994 would be the year when we look at independent elections in South Africa? Nelson Mandela, somebody who spent over 27 years of his life in jail, is somebody who will have for the first time in his life the opportunity to vote this year. The democratic process. Twenty-two African countries are regarded today as countries where there is a democratic process going on, multiparty system and otherwise. And in the field of children, only six African countries have not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. That is

very important because the Convention is the legal instrument that provides the framework for the survival, the protection and the development of Africa's children.

EMEKEKWUE: One of the recommendations of that Convention is for national plans of action for children. So how many African countries have developed these plans of action?

DIALLO: Over 30 African countries have already developed their own national programmes of action. And these programmes are very important, because they are like a reference document at national level, they are not documents that belong to UNICEF, that belong to somebody, they belong to everybody. And they are documents that show, on the one hand, what are individual countries doing to help their own children, and on the other hand, what additional assistance they need from the international community. So this is a very, very important piece of news, that the issues on women and children have become so important that almost the totality of African countries are working or have completed their national programmes of action.

EMEKEKWUE: Yes, but you speak of 30 countries in a continent where you have about 50 countries, so what about the rest? I mean, what are they waiting for?

DIALLO: Well, with the rest, you've got two types of countries: those who are working on their national programmes, therefore the figure 30 plus is the one that, of those that have completed, so those who are working right now on the programmes of action; and others where there is a situation of civil disturbance, like Liberia, like Somalia and countries like that, where it's very, very difficult to talk about setting up a national programme of action. But let me just say very quickly that three things need to be remembered in this connection. After the World Summit for Children, there was the OAU-sponsored International Conference on Assistance to African Children in Dakar.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Organization of African Unity.

DIALLO: Thank you, Mike, the Organization of African Unity that sponsored this conference in Dakar in Senegal in 1992. And then in Cairo, Egypt, June last year, the African leaders reiterated their commitment for this exercise. Thirdly and finally, we will have the OAU summit in the summer this year that will then look at how Africa can accelerate its implementation of its programmes for the survival and development of its own children.

AITA: How does that translate into specifics for children? For example, one of the goals of the World Summit I believe was an 80 percent immunization rate in Africa by the year 2000. Are you getting there?

DIALLO: We're moving very fast. Capitals today like Dakar, Senegal, like Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, have got immunization levels for the under-one [age group]

which are higher than those of, say, New York City and Washington D.C. That's a big piece of news. So by the date of the universal immunization, the date set for the target for universal immunization, two-thirds of African countries [will] have reached that target. But Africa had set up its own target at around 70 percent plus. So now there is this push to have African countries to immunize their children by 80 percent.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is immunization against what, Mr. Diallo?

DIALLO: Immunization against the six major killer diseases, like polio, tuberculosis and some of the other similar diseases.

LITTLEJOHNS: And has this immunization programme had the effect of reducing the incidence of illness and death among children substantially?

DIALLO: Millions of children are living today who would have died had it not been for the positive effect of immunization in Africa. And let me say that what we found in this connection is that the progress in immunization was not just a question of resources, it was also a question of social mobilization. Because sometimes all the immunization was there, but families were not taking their children to have them immunized. So then you had the communicators coming in -- the journalists, the religious leaders, leaders of women's movements -- to encourage families to come and have their children immunized, not once, but sometimes twice or even three times.

EMEKEKWUE: Mr. Diallo, 1994 marks the fourth year you're commemorating the Day of the African Child. Can you look back at this and see what have you achieved through this event?

DIALLO: One of the greatest achievements of the Day of the African Child has been to try and maintain Africa on the agenda of the international community in these days, when there are so many other conflicting or other competing areas of interest -- I'm talking about Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. So every year, June 16th becomes the central switchboard around which Africa and its friends around the world can look at the situation, the state of the African child, what progress has been made since the previous year and what are the challenges for the coming year.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is the significance of June the 16th, why the 16th of June?

DIALLO: June 16th was initially the commemoration of the massacres in Soweto, South Africa in 1976, when, as your viewers will remember, school children rose against the apartheid system and they were massacred. The Organization of African Unity took that date not only to commemorate those massacres but to also positively look at the state of the African child from North Africa all the way to southern Africa.

EMEKEKWUE: You just indicated that one of the objectives is to mobilize more support for Africa and for the children. How has this gone? I mean, do you receive the kind of response you expect?

DIALLO: Well, as an African, I'm really baffled about the slowness of response on the part of the international community. I remember around 1985-1986, when Africa was just coming out of the drought, then there was a lot of talk about good governance, that Africans need to put their house in order, and so on; and I must say that a lot of efforts have been made by Africans themselves, but the aid, the outside assistance, has not been as forthcoming as the efforts made by the Africans. That is something that is of concern to us at UNICEF and that has been reflected somewhat in the serious media internationally as well.

AITA: I was going to ask you that, on the Day of the African Child, if the thing that helps the most or gets the most attention is a situation like the situation in Rwanda, and that's when the attention is there, and the rest of the time there is no attention paid to Africa? I mean, is it these kinds of major catastrophes that are the only thing that spark people's attention?

DIALLO: Judith, I'm always amazed about how little is known about positive developments coming out of Africa. And whenever there is something bad coming out of Africa, it immediately makes the headlines. Okay, I'm maybe exaggerating my point in order to make it, but I wish there were more positive developments that we talked about earlier making their way to the international media, because it will make our work so much easier. Nobody likes to back a loser. People want to know that their contributions are not going into a bottomless pit, that their contributions are making a difference. And there are such examples in Africa that could be brought out and can show that Africans are not just sitting there waiting for outsiders to come and rescue them.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Djibril Diallo, Special Assistant to the Executive Director of UNICEF. Mr. Diallo, that's all very well, what you've just said, but, I mean, there aren't too many examples of brilliant success in Africa one can point to. For example, the International Monetary Fund recently issued an economic report on Africa which said that, I think, Ghana was about the only country in sub-Sahara Africa that had made any significant progress in the past period. So, I mean, what examples can you point to where the situation has improved?

DIALLO: There are many examples. I was recently in Uganda, and Uganda is a country which is quickly moving up and back on its own feet. The army is being disbanded slowly, and money is being used for human development causes. And there

are many countries of that nature. But even more important is the democratic process. Democracy is good for children because it unleashes the creative energies of all political leaders. And what's going on in Africa today is something that nobody would have thought about, say, two years ago, three years ago. So that is something which is really making a tremendous difference for the African continent.

Let me say that some of the points that were made by the World Bank and IMF also include the fact that there are many reasons that are beyond Africa's control today. If I take the issue of the African debt, the African debt is like a monster which is choking the African continent. Today, the repayment level of the debt is reaching 106 per cent of the gross domestic product. Now, let me add very quickly that the equivalent figure for Latin America is only 37 percent. 37 percent in Latin America and 106 percent of the gross domestic product in Africa. Isn't that a monster?

LITTLEJOHNS: So are you suggesting that the creditor countries should write off these debts?

DIALLO: Absolutely. I think that there should be more serious cases of trying to forgive the debt. There should be more serious cases of looking at creative schemes, like debt swaps for child survival, or debt swaps for environmental development. Issues like that need to be explored as well as the issue of additional outside assistance to Africa.

LITTLEJOHNS: But you're aware, I'm sure, that a lot of this money which has been donated or loaned by the industrialized countries has found its way into the un-numbered bank accounts of African leaders. I mean, this is also a problem which is not being sufficiently addressed in the African countries: corruption, et cetera.

DIALLO: Mike, there's a new generation of African leaders which is looking at the situation of the African continent in a very critical way. This new generation is looking at its own mistakes as well, and corruption is something that is being looked at very quickly and in a very hard manner within the continent. But at the same time we've got to realize that the people who are suffering most from the impact of the debt are the poor women and children. And for the rest of it, to my knowledge, they're not the ones who went to the industrialized world or went to the IMF or the World Bank to borrow the money. We've got to protect those people.

EMEKEKWUE: Going back to the question of the situation of children in Africa, it looks to me like it would solve better if our awareness is spread more in the donor countries. So what kind of programmes do we have that tend to create this awareness in these countries?

DIALLO: We at UNICEF try to work in a chain of what we call the grand alliance for child survival and development, to say that this is a long term programme so we've got to have a long look at it. If I take UNICEF where I work as an example -- but there are many other examples -- we've got a network of national committees for UNICEF in the industrialized nations. And these committees have taken it on themselves to set up programmes that are in support of the Decade for the African Child, which means that in all aspects of their activities there would be a dimension that can bring out the priority that UNICEF places on the improvement of the welfare of Africa's children.

AITA: Looking at it from the donor's side, what is UNICEF doing -- or maybe you haven't gotten to that point yet -- to help the countries become self sufficient? I mean, you're providing immunization. What are you doing to work with a country so that they will be able to do it on their own in the not-too-distant future? Or is that not approached at this point?

DIALLO: Oh, it's very much approached, because as the Chinese proverb says, if you give fish to somebody you feed them for, say, one day, but if you teach them how to fish, then you give them a livelihood. So the whole development programme of UNICEF is based on helping people to be self sufficient, whether it's through the programme that we call the Bamako Initiative, which is like the village health care programme whereby villagers take their own health needs in their own hands, or trying to make sure that hospitals are baby friendly through the promotion of breast feeding, or insuring that education, basic education is given priority. All of these are meant first and foremost to insure the self-sufficiency of the people that you have been so concerned about. It's very, very important, because nobody can come from outside Africa and develop Africa for Africans, Africans have got to be in the driver's seat with the assistance of the international community.

EMEKEKWUE: Why does the African child need special attention? I mean, as opposed to children on other continents. I mean, what are the particular problems that he faces as an African child that one doesn't find in South America, for instance, or any other part of the world?

DIALLO: Africa is the only continent in the world where there is the grave risk of retrogression. That means that the African of today runs the risk of being worse off economically than he or she was 20 years ago. As a result, the governing body of UNICEF, the Executive Board, decided that the 1990s will be a decade of priority for Africa. That means that UNICEF will still continue its work in Asia and Latin America,

but over and above that, UNICEF will make a special effort to make sure that the African child, especially the girl child in Africa, is given the attention he or she deserves.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Diallo, you've mentioned a couple of times the situation in South Africa. Is UNICEF involved in South Africa? And if not, will you be when the new South Africa comes on the world stage?

DIALLO: UNICEF has been involved in South Africa at two levels. Number one, before the United Nations came into South Africa, which is the transitional phase, UNICEF was already concerned about the impact of apartheid on children in South Africa. And UNICEF published two reports, called "Children on the Front Line", which looked at the devastating impact of apartheid on children. And we have been inside South Africa, we have an office in Johannesburg which is working within the framework of the transitional team to make sure that the issues relating to children are taken care of.

But let me just add one piece of good news, which was that when Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk got the Nobel Peace Prize, they both decided to devote a large part of their acceptance speech to the issue of the protection of children. And in a ceremony in Oslo last December, they -- in Stockholm, sorry, Sweden -- they signed the World Summit Declaration, which among other things committed them to moving very quickly to insure that all things are put in place for the protection of the South African child, whoever wins the elections.

LITTLEJOHNS: Coming back to the Day of the African Child, how is this going to be celebrated? What's going to happen here in the UN, for example?

DIALLO: There will be a week's activities in New York and in the New York area.

LITTLEJOHNS: Not just one day? It's --

DIALLO: It will be -- the day will be transformed into a week's activities culminating on the 16th itself. And these activities range from religious services to a film festival, to lectures, to bringing about a thousand children from New York City schools, for those children to come and celebrate the African child. And the finale would be on the 16th itself. Two events then. One would be an interfaith service in the morning of the 16th, when the religions of the world will pray for the African child, and in the evening of the 16th, Archbishop Desmond Tutu will give the 1994 keynote address for the Day of the African Child.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is the Archbishop of Capetown.

DIALLO: Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Capetown.

AITA: You hear a lot of speeches, and as you just said, the Nobel speech and such, but from what you're saying, and, you know, maybe sometimes we look at it cynically and say, oh, these are just politicians making speeches, but do you really think it does make a difference in the end?

DIALLO: Issues become important because important people are seen to be paying attention to them. And the challenge here is to make sure that our world leaders keep the promise made to the world's children. Therefore we translate these statements into concrete actions at the country level.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Diallo, thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle, and we wish you great success with the Day of the African Child, which no doubt will be given some attention on television throughout the world. Our guest has been Djibril Diallo, Special Assistant to the Executive Director of UNICEF. He was interviewed by Judith Aita of USIA Press Service and Obi Emekekwue of the News Agency of Nigeria.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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